

Malnutrition

Jessica Moore Otto

They sat in cold metal chairs, the woman's tears carving silent silver streams down her face. The cement walls and floor seemed only to magnify the bite of the mountain air and the wail of the weeping toddler who had just been carried away from them.

They did not want to let her go. But it was a very real choice between keeping her and watching her ribs grow more visible, her body more shrunken, her eyes more dull. At least now she could have a belly full of food instead of the intestines full of worms that took over her tiny frame.

The small cinderblock building that housed this malnutrition center was found in a high-altitude, low-income village outside of Guatemala City. It was just one 30-minute, hairpin-curved bus ride outside the boom and brash in-your-face contrast between luxury and poverty that made up the country's capital. For months now, we'd been bringing teams of Americans there to feed babies, change diapers, wipe faces, and snuggle children whose hearts were tender and torn, not understanding where mommy and daddy had gone.



The wrenching of child from mother and father was like a horror movie, replayed in surround sound over and over. It was never something to get used to, to accept. And this couple's story was predictable, one during which, sadly, we could have filled in the blanks for them during their interview with the director:

"How many children do you have?"

"Five."

"One of your children is already here, yes?"

Heads were lowered as a murmured, "Si" came out of shame-touched lips.

Then followed a general health overview, striking in its similarity to any American doctor's office, shocking in its difference. The gentle questions of the director uncovered that the tiny two-year-old experienced a cough and constant diarrhea.

"And what has she been eating?"

"She will only drink liquids."

"Which ones will she drink?" The director named a popular vitamin-enhanced liquid.

"No. No. Just coffee."

Pen scratching the paper was the only movement in the room. Outside, the sound of roosters and bus horns broke the stillness as the mother raised her head and answered the next question that came:

"And you are pregnant again?"

Silence and lowered eyes.

"Yes."

There was no condemnation. There was only compassion for the mother and care for the father, whose faces carved by desperation and lack of hope and hard labor belied their young ages. There was a bath and a bed and a meal for a starving girl. There was a wisp of hope touching the air, curling around the smell of the wood stove smoke that hung over the room.

This little girl would see health. This little girl, and so many others in that place, would know the laughter and playfulness and bright eyes and strong hair that are the right of any child. This little girl would feel strength come back to her tiny, brittle arms. But some would not. Some would make the journey to this place far too late. Some would be too weak, too wounded. Some would fall asleep in their urine-soaked beds and never wake up.

Today, as I watch mist hover above the frosty field outside my window, a field which will provide abundance for animals who are more well-fed than so many humans breathing this planet's air today, I stop and remember this girl.

Today, as I open my phone to see perfectly-crafted ads that tell me all I need to own, need to have, need to add to my stockpile, I stop and remember these children.



Today, as I constantly hold in my hand a device which cost me more than many of these families will see in a year of body-breaking work, I stop.

And I remember.

There is nothing wrong with plenty. There is no guilt in provision. But there is a quiet voice inside me, and perhaps inside you, a voice which I often hush; a voice which reminds me that my house is just a place to live and not a showcase like one of the round-the-clock TV show renovations demands it must be.

A voice which reminds me that I live in a bubble where most people I know are more worried about eating too much than not eating enough. Where we have so much food that we must discipline ourselves to limit it. A voice which reminds me that I know, even when I don't want to admit it, what is excess and what is enough.

I can only listen and determine what is enough and what is too much for me. I cannot do that for you, nor should I. But as I am pushed into this Season Of More...more things, more shine to distract us, more money changing hands and possessions changing places and more and more and more...perhaps I can stop. And face the truth that I don't want to: I am the lucky one. My home and my multiple cars and my books and my overflowing pantry and unused clothes in my closet make me overwhelmingly rich.



This year may the Season of More not just mean more for us, for our already over-stimulated kids and our already over-stuffed drawers and shelves. May it also mean More for those who have never even known Enough. May it mean More not just for the tiny, malnourished bodies across border lines, but also for the nearly 200 tiny hearts in my rural county who signed up for Christmas help this year...help that doesn't come from the government, but from regular people who are willing to go with Less so that the little ones can have More.

This year may the Season of More mean something else: More love and generosity in our hearts. More contentment with the peace I can't purchase. This year may the Season of More bring us less in tangible goods and much in goodwill toward others.

"It is not how much we give, but how much love we put into giving." Mother Teresa

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